



## **TESEV PAPER:**

### **DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE DIALOGUE**

The instilment of democratic values in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa region has become a widely discussed international issue after the launch of the “Broader Middle East and North Africa” (BMENA) initiative in 2003 and the G-8 Summit at Sea Island in June 2004.

Countries from within the region have also discussed and developed the initiative in various platforms including the Aqaba Meeting (December 2003), Alexandria Declaration (March 2004), the Arab Summit in Tunisia (May 2004) and the Sana’a Inter-Governmental Regional Conference on Democracy, Human Rights and the Role of the International Criminal Court (January 2004).

The subsequent Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) program is designed to foster productive dialogue between civil society, governments and parliaments of the broader Middle East and North Africa region (BMENA). The DAD aims to share experiences, best practices and lessons learned in order to develop specific reform initiatives on issues relating to political reform, democracy and human rights, with the participation of non-governmental actors, political leaders, media representatives and civil society experts.

Three NGOs from the three countries (Italy, Turkey and Yemen) chosen to start the initiative are responsible for developing and applying strategies on the initiative as laid out in the final statement under the “partnership for common future” strategy. The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is the responsible NGO from Turkey, as democratic partner country of the region, together with the Human Rights Information and Training Center from Yemen and No Peace Without Justice from Italy.

The DAD program breaks-down the aim to provide response and support to the growing momentum for reform in the region into a number of component themes that can be tackled productively. The two themes identified as priorities in the first year are:

- (1) the participation of women in public life;
- (2) political pluralism and electoral processes.



TESEV chose the subject axis “the participation of women in public life” and organized a symposium in Istanbul 20-21 June 2005 entitled ‘Empowering Women in Public Life and Democratic Development in the BMENA region’. In line with the goals of the DAD, the symposium provided a forum for discussion of issues related to women’s civil political and socio economic rights that shapes women’s public life. It was emphasized that democratization is a key step in ensuring security in the region. Democracy cannot be imposed from above and thus grassroots women’s movements represent a central force from which democracy can be cherished, supported and encouraged.

The urgent need for governments to take responsibility and address gender inequality was underlined during the Istanbul symposium. The gender gap currently existing in the region is extremely wide. Women in the region still have basic problems including illiteracy, economic inequality and a lack of fundamental rights. It is of utmost importance and urgency that governments address this issue through concrete measures and mechanisms. It is also vital that domestic and international donors allocate adequate resources to NGOs.

A suggestion supported by many governmental representatives as well as NGO participants was the establishment of an independent international monitoring body for the application of CEDAW – The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. CEDAW was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, and it has often been referred to as an international bill of rights for women. A total of 180 states parties have ratified the Convention – with reservations in some cases. CEDAW provides an effective framework, and a set of benchmarks for women’s movements in the region to materialize their demands.

Networking and experience sharing is very important for the proposed monitoring mechanism. We believe that a committee of women’s organization representatives from the region can be formed and can start to work on this. However, it should be underlined that this is by no means an overnight process.

It is also important to keep in mind that democratization is a long and arduous process and the maintenance of sustained will is a prerequisite. Democratization involves a mixture of popular participation, political parties, elections, institutionalization and other factors. Outside assistance



can only come in the form of encouragement, as democracy necessitates local ownership. The Democracy Assistance Dialogue, as such, can be regarded as an initiative that provides a platform for civil society to affect policy, encouraging sustainable concrete change.

TESEV, along with our partner NGOs in the DAD (NPWJ and HRITC), are committed to the continuation of the DAD process in order to address many of the democratic deficits that continue to exist despite some superficial reform having taken place. Within this framework, TESEV is going to organize its second symposium on ‘empowering women’ at the end of January 2006, which will be a follow-up to the first event. We hope to come up with specific recommendations to be implemented, and also to explore the viability of the suggestion to form a monitoring mechanism for the CEDAW.